

# LIFE

## THEATER

Emmy winner Jodi Long wrote and stars in “American Jade,” at Bucks County Playhouse May 20-June 11. Courtesy of Bucks County Playhouse

# Mom’s advice pays off for actor

Jodi Long touches on ancestors’ imprints in “American Jade.”

By Jane M. Von Bergen  
FOR THE INQUIRER

When it came to auditioning for a role, Jodi Long’s mother, a showbiz pro, always gave her the same advice: Wear false eyelashes. “I said, ‘Mom, nobody wears false eyelashes anymore except Carol Channing,’ ” Long said with a laugh.

Lessons from our parents. Lessons to our children — it’s all wrapped up at the Bucks County Playhouse in “American Jade,” written by and starring film and theater actor Long. In 2021, Long became the first Asian American actor to win a Daytime Emmy Award, for a supporting role as Mrs. Basil E. in the Netflix series “Dash & Lily.”

*American Jade* “is about imprints,” Long explained. “It’s about the emotional imprints we get from our parents, and our surrounding environs, and the imprints we get from society, whether you are a woman or a man or a person of color.”

True for everyone, but what makes *American Jade* unique is the specific set of imprints. Long’s parents were both in vaudeville — her parents met backstage. She was a showgirl; he was a tap dancer. Popular on the New York’s Chinatown nightclub circuit, they landed an appearance on “The Ed Sullivan Show” as the singing, dancing, and comedy act, Larry and Trudie Leung. Long made a documentary about her parents — *Long Story Short*, released last year.

At the age of 7 and wanting a part in Sidney Lumet’s 1962 Broadway show, “Nowhere to Go But Up,” Long followed her mother’s advice — false eyelashes, and chopsticks securing a bun in her hair, a stereotypical hairstyle for female Asian actors at the time, Long said. She got the part.

Her father, she said, had performed in the Broadway hit “Flower Drum Song.” Decades later, she landed a role in *Flower Drum Song*’s 2002 revival on Broadway.

“I came full circle,” she said. “I was determined to get that part. *Flower Drum Song* is set in a nightclub — the same kind of nightclub my parents performed in. I grew up backstage. I

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saw that through the lens of a child as I was growing up. That’s why it was important for me to get *Flower Drum Song*. I grew up in it and I understood it.”

Vaudeville, Long explains, was killed off by television, and the children of vaudevillians are growing older. Even so, she said, they recognize each other in how they approach their work.

But *American Jade* isn’t just about theater, Long said. It’s also about the immigrant experience — particularly in the Depression when jobs were scarce and when people with talent, like her parents, turned to the stage to feed their families.

For Asian actors, Long said, sometimes the only possible roles were stereotypical ones — the ones you had to audition for with chopsticks in your hair.

“There was a certain amount of characters that you play, and you play them over and over until you outgrow them, or you die,” she said. Knowing that, her father urged to skip showbiz in favor of being a newscaster. Ironically, Long frequently landed roles as a newscaster. “I can’t believe how many newscasters I played,” she said.

“I think things are changing, and that’s a good thing,” she said. “There are so many more opportunities for this newer generation.”

May 20-June 11, Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope, 215-862-2121 or bcptheater.org